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ABSTRACT

One of the most creative, active, purposeful and successful efforts of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), active from 1935 to 1939, was the Children's Theatre. Plays for production were selected on the basis of educational and cultural value, with special attention on sufficient realism to help children's awareness of self and place in the world. Plays (such as "Alice in Wonderland," "Aladdin," "Hansel and Gretel," "Babes in Toyland," "Mother Goose Goes to Town," "The Emperor's New Clothes," "Rip Van Wrinkle" and "Adventures of Pinocchio") were produced across the nation, providing an opportunity for millions of children in America to attend the theater. Theatrical elements of music, lights, and sound effects were emphasized; costumes were colorful, significant, and specific; characters were generally stereotypes and performed by adults. Additionally, the Federal Theatre successfully explored the therapeutic values of theater in the treatment of "backward and mentally dormant" children and children with speech disorders. The Community Drama Unit of the FTP also successfully taught children through theatrical experience as opposed through textbooks only. The greatest achievement, however, was creating a whole new appreciative audience of children, a new generation eager for the exciting adventure of live theater. It remains a valuable source of information for people working in contemporary children's theater. (Information about two recently published works on the FTP and its production materials is included.) (KEH)

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The Federal Theatre Project Children's Theatre: Materials and Resources

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP), 1935-39, was one of four Works Progress Administration arts projects which were designed to rehabilitate, retrain and provide employment for artists during the Great Depression. One of the most creative, active, purposeful and successful efforts of the FTP was the Children's Theatre. It filled a void which existed at this time--when Europe and Russia had many children's theaters and radio stations producing children's programs--entertainment for children was being virtually neglected in America. There were few good plays for children, mainly because writers did not find them lucrative during the Depression.

When Hallie Flanagan was appointed national director of the FTP soon after its creation in 1935, she brought to the job a long-standing interest in children's theatre and a determination to do what she could to stimulate its development. First, good plays had to be found--or created. The search for children's plays began with reviews of bibliographies, the results of playwriting contests, and contacts with organizations, theatres and schools.

At first educators selected the plays for children. Later, advisors included psychologists, social workers and teachers. Criteria for selection included the content of the play and its

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qualifications as good theater. Plays had to have educational and cultural value, as well as being imaginative, humorous and sometimes fantastical. But they were also required to have an aura of realism sufficient to help the child's awareness of self and place in the world.

Children's plays presented to the FTP were designed to have the essence of drama, to keep dialogue at a minimum but not be condescending and to have a lot of action. The theatrical elements of music, lights and sound effects were emphasized. Costumes were colorful, significant and specific. Characters were generally stereotypes. The FTP pioneered in the use of adult performers in children's plays.

As with other FTP productions, the development of each Children's Theatre presentation was recorded in a production bulletin, a notebook that generally included director's comments, costume and set designs, press clippings, photographs, and various other information pertaining to the play. The production bulletin for Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass in Portland, Oregon reveals that the director and the adaptor, who were admitted Lewis Carroll devotees, kept the script as close to the original story as possible. They noted that the production had tremendous appeal to the children in the audience--as well as the adults. Care was taken to design the sets and costumes in the style of Tenniel's original drawings. The show unfolded in eighteen episodes "without intermission, with the aid of a second traveler," which enabled them to change scenes quickly. The set

pieces and second traveler were painted in brilliant colors following a playing card design.

> Wire framework was constructed for animal costumes and the White Queen's costume. The tube effects on the queens' costumes were accomplished by making tubes of the material reinforced with wire and filled with kapok. The weight of this gave the proper bouncing effect when the character moved. Wigs were made of white mop-fiber. The use of cotton materials throughout in plain bold colors and bright prints made the costuming of this production effective and inexpensive.

In Los Angeles, at the Theatre of the Magic Strings, Alice in Wonderland was presented with marionettes. Marionette theater was an important part of the FTP. There were twenty-two marionette units across the country, whose productions were predominantly classics and variety shows--an average of one hundred shows a week. The cast of the Los Angeles Alice was composed of more than twenty-five marionettes, with each puppeteer taking several parts. A revolving stage was used to accommodate the fifteen scenes used--when one set was on, another was being set up in back. Again, the costumes were based on Tenniel's illustrations. This production brought "loud applause and affectionate bravos from juniors and adults."

Aladdin, also in Los Angeles, used many special effects to delight children: the illusion of flying through space while standing on a magic carpet, and the efreet (genie) trick, which involved "exchanging a fake jar for one containing the efreet which was concealed behind a set piece. When the lid was removed a concealed operator pulled a string which went through a pulley

directly above the jar and caused the puppet to rise in the air, accompanied by a puff of smoke from a smoke pot hidden in the jar." The harem scene featured a trampoline, centerstage, disguised as a pool of water. Many trick props were used. The sets were designed to suggest the Orient generally, rather than any one definite place.

A press notice proclaimed that this opus "definitely surpasses all previous presentations of this type. Virginia Murray, who played Aladdin, proved to be the surprise of the evening. Her characterization of this vagabond boy of the East was particularly fine. Her voice, whether she was speaking or singing, was clear and resonant. Incidently, Miss Murray showed some fair athletic agility." (Shades of Mary Martin in Peter Pan much later.) Myra Kinch was congratulated for her direction of the dance numbers. "Uncle Sam has rubbed the magic lamp to bring forth Aladdin for children," another press clipping says. FTP production bulletins often reported the unfavorable reactions, too. One audience member commented that the FTP Aladdin was "a sad tampering with a classic" and another that "in spots it is hardly a choice for a children's theater."

Yasha Frank described his handling of Hansel and Gretel in Los Angeles as:

> One of the directorial tactics in producing for children is to insist on very clear articulation and to reduce the playing tempo by one third of normal. It is a good habit to repeat all important expository details three times. All comedy business is also based on the rhythm of three. Business is done once to establish, again to plant, and once more for the laugh.

> The special problem in 'Hansel and Gretel' was to eradicate fear of the witch. This was accomplished by transforming her into a guardian angel. Also Hansel and Gretel met the animals of the forest scene as benign friends.

Audience reaction was positive and recorded in the production bulletin:

> The unquenchable enthusiasm of the audience of children proved the time-old story, 'Hansel and Gretel,' still a popular play. The innovations of animals and their antics and lollipops for the audience added much to the enjoyment of the play.
>
> Some of the children came to the performances several times; but whether it was from interest in the play or the desire to catch a lollypop (sic) thrown to the audience, they themselves will loath to tell.

Ralph Chessé's production of Hansel and Gretel in San Francisco had been well-publicized, particularly by means of a story and picture contest advertised in local newspapers that provided one hundred lucky kids with one free ticket each (and the privilege of bringing a guest) to one of two Saturday matinees. The contest entries that had been forwarded to Ralph Chessé were on display in the lobby.

A Portland production of Babes in Toyland was based on the Hansel and Gretel story, and featured a dog, a cat, a horse, a brownie, a witch's cat, an imp and other beasts of the field and forest--all for a labor costs of less than $2,000 and materials estimated at about $400. The incidental music was that of Humperdinck's well-known operetta, but Hansel and Gretel's actions were brought "up to modern times in such familiar duties as brushing teeth and feeding the animals. The play ends by

including the audience in the final shouting desire to burn the Witch."

In Seattle, Washington, Mother Goose Goes to Town featured audience participation, with Mother Goose leading the children in singing "The Farmer in the Dell" when the curtain opened. One vital item for this production was to have the children singing from the audience, and being led in children's musical numbers by King Cole and Mother Goose. At other points in the routine, the children are induced by Mother Goose to call for story-book characters, such as Little Boy Blue, Little Jack Horner and Old King Cole, so that they can appear on the stage. This was stimulated by having actors doubling in the audience to start the calling. At some times this was also augmented by having a voice on the Public Address system call for the person wanted.

The choreographer for the Emperor's New Clothes in Chicago believed that "stylized pantomime is valuable in children's productions because it relates more significantly to children's experiences than the spoken word and it has no age limit for its appeal" and so that is the way it was presented.

The front curtain was illustrated to transport the mind of a child into fairyland before the play began. Moreover, once the curtain was opened, what child could have resisted a set that included a room with a secret hiding place, the key of which was a large ruby set in a wall, and a secret passage for the empress, who was dressed like a "dainty piece of Dresden china"? The aim

was to "meet the fairyland dream of a child on the subject of great riches."

The costumes were "bold, brilliant and exaggerated" to express a comedy note: turbans measuring twenty inches across gave the Emperor and his general a "puffed and bigoted look." "Pearls" decorating the costumes were the size of pigeons' eggs. In the scene where the Emperor believes himself clothed in invisible clothes, the comedy effect was produced by dressing the actor in an orange shirt with regular shirt tails, above which he wore the exaggerated turban. Actors of all ages were used, and they were directed to play their parts with as much enthusiasm and fun as they expected from the audience. Director William Pollard "wanted to make each character so significant and cameo-like that the children who saw the play would go home and re-enact the various characterizations in their back yards, their basements and their attics. I have been told by a number of adults that their children were walking and talking in impersonation of the various characters in the play. To me, this reaction is necessary for the success of plays for children."

The Federal Theatre for Youth in Cleveland took productions into schools until the start of World War II. Charlotte Chorpenning's 1937 production of The Emperor's New Clothes made use of a unique set developed by the FTP to accommodate its wide variety of informal theaters--particularly elementary, junior and senior high schools. The unit consisted of pylons, levels, screens and quarter arches which could easily be adapted to

various stage areas. In fact, the unit was so adaptable it was used in the Cleveland Auditorium and sixty-eight schools and playgrounds!

The Emperor's New Clothes was also performed by the Caravan or Portable Theatre, an ingenious, effective, and dramatic enterprise. In New York, the Portable Theatre was made up of mobile units that served in the parks and playgrounds of the city's five boroughs throughout the summer. For the Caravan Theatre, the FTP developed a portable stage thirty feet long, eight feet wide, and eight feet, six inches high. Once side of the caravan could be lowered to form a stage apron, while the other lowered to become the floor of tarpaulin-walled dressing rooms. The erection of the stage only required an hour. Then, provided there was a proper outlet and space for an audience, the show could go on! The free performances given by this mobile FTP unit made live theater accessible to children and adults throughout the New York area.

Los Angeles, like New York, had a successful Portable Theatre as early as 1937. Ralph Chessé described it as an "old broken down truck which had been donated by the army and cost almost as much to put in running shape as a new truck would have cost." A stage and bridges were built into the large van-like truck body, and an apron opened out on the side, making the stage floor.

This Federal Theatre Project puppet van was booked solid with a schedule of playground appearances. All the playground

directors clamored for the portable shows, generally a fifteen-minute program made up of circus and vaudeville numbers. There were more bookings than could be handled: four performances a day at four different playgrounds as long as the good weather lasted. The Portable Theatre did much to establish good will in the community; the big circus van with its bright red, white and blue decorations of elephants and clowns was recognized everywhere. It was greeted with cheers and wild enthusiasm by children and adults alike at every playground. Over 500,000 people saw these free performances. In fact, the summertime Portable Theatre in Los Angeles aroused such enthusiasm that the program was expanded to provide performances in public schools in the fall. This was possible because the portable stage in the van could be moved into school auditoriums.

Tinderbox, based on a Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale, was specifically prepared for the schools. However, it was not actually performed in schools because the school board objected to its "political significance." Instead, the board requested the Circus Show that had been presented at the playgrounds, and that is what they got. The fifteen-minute show was expanded to thirty minutes and was given four times a day, twice in the morning and twice in the afternoon to every school in Los Angeles. This made the season very successful financially, even at 10 cents admission, with the Parent-Teacher's Association getting a percentage. For the 1938 school season a new program was prepared. Again, the school board members rejected some of

the show. They objected to chorus girl and hillbilly puppets, and felt that a tree which came to life and danced would frighten the children.

By the fall of 1938 plans for the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco were in progress. Blueprints for the Federal Theatre to be built at the Exposition show a very modern auditorium with the most advanced switchboard, lighting and stage equipment. A complete marionette theater was included with seating for 150 people. For this theater, Ralph Chessé designed a built-in stage with a second level at the back serving as a back bridge, a revolving stage, switchboard, spotlights, sound equipment and beautiful red velvet front curtains. He painted decorative murals on the walls to complete the "little jewel box theatre." Snow White alternated with Marionette Varieties and Rip Van Wrinkle.

Rip Van Wrinkle was also performed by the Buffalo (New York) Historical Marionette Unit in such diverse locations as the recreation hall of the YMCA, the Batavia Veteran's Hospital, in front of the Physical Culture Hotel in Dansville, and in a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp. In White Plains, New York, audiences saw Rip Van Wrinkle in public and parochial schools, at the Westchester County Penitentiary (in the photographs the guards and inmates faces were turned from the camera), in orphanages, and it was sponsored by the Boy and Girl Scouts.

New York was the scene of an unexpectedly brief production of The Revolt of the Beavers, a "fantastic comedy" for children. Reviewed as a "fable of Mother Goose studying [Karl] Marx" by Brooks Atkinson of The New York Times, the play told the story of a revolution by some oppressed and barkless worker beavers (on roller skates--an early Starlight Express) who overcame the chief and his cohorts. After only twelve performances in the spring of 1937, this play was withdrawn because of the controversy it was generating among some of the critics. Defending the play before Martin Dies and the House Un-American Activities Committee, Hallie Flanagan said that The Revolt of the Beavers was simply a tale for children in which children triumph over an oppressor. Educators, child welfare experts, social workers, religious leaders and child psychologists agreed. A survey of hundreds of children revealed that to them, the moral of the play was "Don't be selfish." Several youngsters who were asked had the impression that the play meant that the world would be a better place if everyone were nine years old (as they were), could play and eat ice cream.

In Gary, Indiana, Betty Kessler Lyman organized various children's troupes into fourteen dramatic and musical units under Federal Theatre directors in the summer of 1937. The first unit organized was the Mickey Mouse Theatre. Other units had such appropriate names as the Peter Pan Players, the Tom Sawyer unit, the Merrymakers, and the Adventurers. In the fall the children's units were combined and renamed the Children's Unit.

An article in the Cincinnati newspaper gave a gracious tribute to the members of the Federal Theatre group when they bought out the opening performance of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" at the Playbox on Tuesday afternoon, December 20, and handed their contributions in to the state director, asking that under-privileged children be their guests at this performance. The director wholeheartedly cooperated and announced that the first performance on Tuesday afternoon was withdrawn from the public, in order to accommodate these children.

The Cleveland Federal Theatre for Youth also presented Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. The scenes were surrounded by a large window, silhouetted, so that they appeared much like a series of living Christmas cards. For costumes, the actors used their own black Prince Alberts, tail coats and slacks. The balance of the costumes were made in the theater's own sewing department and were dyed in clear, bright colors to achieve the required Christmas Card effect. Top hats were lent by the local little theater.

Imagine a Pinocchio who does not tell lies and has no tell-tale expanding nose. This was Yasha Frank's 1937 characterization of the tale of the marionette who becomes a boy in the familiar tale, Adventures of Pinocchio, in Los Angeles. For this production, Frank wrote the dialogue in rhyme and in a spare style designed to keep the action moving. He further changed the classic toy shop to a "show shop" to allow for a

spectacular extravaganza of vaudeville, circus, pantomime, marionettes and music, employing and showcasing many artists.

This Yasha Frank production was fast-paced and full of changes. Audience reaction, as recorded in the production bulletin, included tribute to "the many touches that made it particularly charming for children." Members of the audience also suggested that children's plays be given at a more convenient time for children. This was soon accomplished when the Saturday matinees were reserved for children, while adults packed the evening performances. Among those adults were Walt Disney and his technical staff, who reportedly attended eight performances. It is interesting to note that Disney's next feature-length cartoon was Pinocchio.

In his book Six Plays for Young People from the Federal Theatre Project, 1936-1939, Lowell Swortzell described what happened later when Pinocchio was performed in New York:

> When the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) came to an end on the night of June 30, 1939, Children's Theatre unit revised the final curtain of its production of Pinocchio, which had been playing to capacity houses on Broadway since the preceding December. Instead of ending with the customary scene of a birthday party celebrating Pinocchio's transformation from a marionette into a human boy, the new conclusion, hurriedly arranged by director/author Yasha Frank, contained a surprise calculated to stun the audience. In the midst of the happy anticipation of Pinocchio's last heroic entrance there suddenly came the sound of an offstage gun explosion, followed by a booming voice solemnly announcing, "Pinocchio is dead!" "Shivers just went up and down everybody's spine," an actress on stage at that moment later remembered. "You could hear the silence, it was so dramatic." Then voices cried out from associates Frank had planted in the audience: "Who killed Pinocchio? Who killed Pinocchio?" The

> mysterious offstage voice spoke again. "I will tell you who killed Pinocchio," and began to list by name each Congressman who had voted against the appropriation to continue the FTP. Summoned to record these last moments, Life photographed the cast assembled in mourning, with old Gepetto and his cat kneeling in prayer in front of Pinocchio's bier, all weeping over the dead figure who only minutes before had been cheered by children and adults alike. Lifting his coffin, the cast and audience together marched out of the theatre and proceeded to Times Square chanting, "Save the Federal Theatre!" The next day, newspaper headlines repeated: "PINOCCHIO IS DEAD. WHO KILLED PINOCCHIO?" Life printed a second photograph showing the abandoned puppet stretched out lifeless on the floor of the empty stage, accompanied by the caption: "Left behind was the image of Pinocchio, limp and alone beside the stagehand's working light." So a dead Pinocchio became the public symbol for the demise of the FTP and its nearly 8,000 actors and employees across the country who that same night lost their jobs. The next day they found themselves locked out of offices and barred from playhouses in cities that for the last three and a half years had been part of a national theatre movement never before experience by American audiences.

In addition to providing an opportunity for millions of children in America to attend the theater, the Federal Theatre attempted to determine the therapeutic values of theater in the treatment of "backward and mentally dormant" children. At Bellevue Hospital in New York City, marionette performances of simple fairy tales and folklore were presented by Federal Theatre puppeteers under the direction of hospital psychiatrists. The children in the audience at first were described as silent and listless with dull eyes, without the gaiety, laughter, sense of play and illusion usual in the make-believe world of children. In time, however, the marionettes began to take on identity and characters in the children's eyes--and the children became aware

of the troubles and trials of the marionettes. The children then began to operate the marionettes and sew costumes for them. They made up stories, too.

The success of this "theatre of therapeutics" encouraged the Community Drama Unit of the FTP to create a "Psychiatric Theatre" to aid the diagnosis and treatment of mentally ill and socially maladjusted adolescent girls also at Bellevue. Under the FTP program, these patients usually wrote their own plays, designed costumes and scenery, and acted for the other patients. This use of drama as a catharsis for the soul as Aristotle said is similar to what we now call psychodrama.

The Community Drama Unit also worked with the New York City Schools to teach children to learn not only by textbook, but through their own theatrical experience as well. The unit developed a program which included improvisation, original dramatization and formal drama. The Community Drama Unit also had success helping children with speech disorders.

The greatest achievement of the Federal Theatre Project from beginning to end, however, was that it created a whole new appreciative audience of children, a new generation eager for the exciting adventure of live theater.

Production material from the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project are on deposit in Special Collections and Archives in the George Mason University Library, Fairfax, Virginia. Two recently published finding aids to the collection are: The Federal Theatre Project--A Catalog-Calendar of

Productions, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986 and A Register of the Library of Congress Collection of U.S. Work Projects Administration Records on deposit at George Mason University, Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1987. They should be available in a library near you.

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